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OPINION AND COMMENTARY

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The CIA, refurbished

There are sparks emerging from Washington over the subject of how to reorganize the intelligence gathering and processing community. Secretary of Defense Harold Brown is objecting to a proposal to take two of the big agencies for the gathering of technical intelligence out of his control and put them under Adm. Stansfield Turner, Director of Central Intelligence.

Any time anyone proposes to take a large bureau with a big budget away from one department of government and hand it over to another department there is bound to be some marginal friction. This is inherent in any bureaucracy. The fact that Admiral Turner is now accused of power grabbing by defenders of the Pentagon's role in intelligence proves only that President Carter has listened to a lot of advice from experts, is about to act upon it, and those who have lost out in the arguments are suffering bureaucratic pains.

The essential issue is whether Mr. Carter can rebuild the intelligence community in a way which will allow it to do what it was originally intended to do.

That original purpose of the builders when the CIA (Central Intelligence Agency) was set up back in 1947 was "to stem the disorderly flood of advice based on military and diplomatic hopes and fears," which went to the president and put in its place a steady flow of objective information to be based on the "evidence available from all sources with no vested interest in either foreign policy or military policy and no bias except toward establishing the truth as well as it can be perceived."

That phrasing of the purpose comes from Ray Cline, former deputy director of the CIA, in a book "Secrets, Spies and Scholars" which has been used in analyzing past mistakes and charting the future course for the CIA. It is the best statement of the proper function of a central intelligence organization I have seen. It is the result of what happened back in the old days when most advice to the president reflected the hopes and fears of one or another segment of government with vested interests to protect. It was a "disorderly flood." The CIA was designed to replace it with unbiased information.

The system worked remarkably well from its beginning in 1947 down to the Vietnam war and Watergate. Those two painful episodes in history distorted the system. One by-product was the emergence at the top level of the government of Henry Kissinger who insisted on personal control of the flow of intelligence information. CIA thinking ceased to channel directly to the president. Instead, it channeled through Dr. Kissinger who accepted or rejected as he pleased.

On the side another change occurred. Technical developments such as intelligence gathering satellites caused the expansion of two agencies at the Pentagon in charge of the many and various ways of mechanical intelligence gathering. One of these is the National Security Agency. The other is the National Reconnaissance Office. So massive has been their growth that these two agencies alone consume about three-quarters of the American intelligence budget. And they are presently under Pentagon control.

Should they be put under the Director of Central Intelligence?

Secretary Brown, in a speech to the National Press Club on May 27, said he wanted the new system "to allow the expression of differing views at the highest level."

Pentagon estimates are notoriously warped by budgetary hopes and fears and by inter-service rivalries. The Navy sees the "Soviet threat" in terms which call for more warships; the Air Force in terms which call for new and better bombers; the Army in terms which call for more and heavier tanks, etc. Pentagon estimates are almost always more alarming than CIA estimates, which is one reason why the Pentagon wants to hang onto as much of the intelligence analyzing and estimating role as possible.

There will be bureaucratic bruises suffered before all this is sorted out. But the process is essentially healthy. It is all part of the rebuilding which is going on in the Washington intelligence community. Watergate is over. Its damage is receding into the past. The letters CIA are no longer regarded as indecent even among self-styled liberals.

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